

Carl Lewis:

life beyond nine Olympic gold medals



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He competed in five Olympic Games, won nine gold medals and was named Olympian of the century by Sports Illustrated. Now Carl Lewis is setting his sights on an even bigger goal: to help end hunger. In an exclusive interview with SNS he explains why.

From athletic diets to fighting hunger. It might not seem an obvious fit, but for Carl Lewis it felt like a logical move. Upon finishing his sports career, the nine time Olympic gold medalist who competed in track and field decided to use his fame for greater goals. In 2009, he became a so-called 'Goodwill Ambassador' to the Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations.

His aims, he declared at the time, were to change the global attitude towards how poverty affects the world and help poorer countries become more self-sufficient.

Lewis, who won his last Olympic gold medal in 1996, says he realized he had to take action while on a trip to India. He wondered how the locals could cope with all the poverty visible on the street.

"I was talking to the general manager of the hotel, and I said 'You know, you

drive past these people every day and they're hungry, and they're homeless, and they don't have anything'," Lewis says. "'How do you do it, and just keep driving?' And the guy said, 'Well you get used to it.'"

"That just kind of hit me. How can we get used to that? We should be doing something about that. And then it wasn't long after that, that I was approached by FAO to be an ambassador, and I said: 'absolutely.' Because, how can we have an attitude in our country, or in our world where we say, 'oh I will get used to it,' and just step over it and keep going. It just shouldn't happen."

Lewis' experience in India made him realize a lot of work needs to be done to change people's perceptions about poverty and hunger. He also realized that his incredibly successful athletic career could help to achieve some of that change.

"Well, people listen," said Lewis of the affect his athletic success has had on his fight against hunger. "I think that there are a couple of things. Number one, obviously, the fame, it brings people to the party, and that's a great thing that the hard work and dedication did."

Credibility

Lewis feels that his life experience as a professional sportsman has shaped the

way he looks at the world. His athletic career allowed him to travel around the world and visit countries most people never get the opportunity to see.

"I have seen the world, you know. I have been to the smallest places in Vietnam, and I have been to India, and I have been to the wealthiest countries in the world; the United States, and I have seen poverty and hunger here in this country."

"I think that it brings some credibility. It's kind of funny in a way that all of those accolades also took me to Poona, India, which is one of the poorest places you could imagine, or way out into the country side outside of Ho Chi Minh City. So I think that it's more than just the fame. Everybody knows who I am and they will listen because they saw me on television. I got the opportunity to go to those places and see hunger and see how it affects people. And also to see how it affects us, even in a developed nation."

Armed with this awareness, Lewis has set out to open people's eyes to the realities of hunger. He hopes, he says, to change the global attitudes about how poverty affects the world.

"The biggest thing for me is global attitude. I know that I but up against people a lot in America about their 'Well, I have mine' attitude. Whether

it is welfare or food stamps here in the United States, [the attitude is one of] 'Well I have mine, and the poor should just work, they're just lazy', says Lewis.

"But actually, the reality is that even a lot of people that think they have it all are one paycheck away or one step away [from being homeless]."

"A lot of developing countries haven't been treated well because ultimately, in a lot of cases, they're actually being used. They're resources are being used, and they've been abused and then dumped."

"What I would like is our global attitude to change. A world where we say: 'You know what, if one person's hungry in the world, we're all hungry. And if I am the wealthiest person, then I care about it.'"

"There are so many very wealthy people doing wonderful things, like the Gates Foundation and Bill Clinton. Bill Gates is the wealthiest man in the world and he works tirelessly to do things for other people. I wish that everyone would take his lead, that wealthy people would take his lead or Warren Buffett's lead, or take the lead of Bill Clinton, or take the lead of people who are really giving back. That's how we solve the problem, its attitude adjustment."

Self-sufficient

According to FAO estimates, there were over 1 billion undernourished individuals in 2009. Although Lewis realizes that changing people's perception about how poverty affects the world would be a big step in the fight against hunger, he also acknowledges that more needs to be done, such as working to make poorer countries more self-sufficient.

"I think one of the things we need to do — and what the FAO is focusing more on — is helping people to become self-sufficient. Instead of dropping food all the time, we need to think: how can we help them grow their own food? How can we help them develop their own areas?"

"I think that's the biggest issue, and it is a huge benefit for everyone in the world if countries can become more self-sufficient. Instead of giving them food, give them feed and fertilizer. Then all of a sudden we are helping them become self-sufficient, and then we can move on to the next group, and then just check back up."

MDG Champion

Earlier this year the UN called upon Lewis to help promote the Millenium Development Goals by becoming an 'MDG Champion.' In September, he attended a high profile summit in New York, where even the likes of Bill and Hillary Clinton were present. Whilst the experts discussed the progress of the MDG's in the run up to their deadline in 2015, Lewis gained an insight in the enormity of the tasks.

"I think the biggest thing is that we are marching, but we're not marching fast enough because there is still a billion people hungry," says Lewis. "But it was an honor to be a part of it, sitting in meetings and discussing issues, not just making appearances but actually discussing issues and ideas that can make a difference."

"We have to make the unobtainable goals obtainable. That's what the Millennium Conference showed me. It is creating information for the general public that didn't understand the issues. And I think that people came out of that summit saying: 'I want to be more involved', because now they have a clear understanding of what we're doing."

The strength to stand up

Although today Lewis is using his knowledge and influence in the fight against hunger, he has always believed in standing up for what is right. During his career, Lewis fought to make his sport professional, and wasn't afraid to talk about athletes wages, or even drugs. He says he acquired the strength to stand up for these many causes from his parents.



USA's Carl Lewis reacts to receiving the gold medal for the men's long jump, in Olympic Stadium July 29, 1996. Lewis won the event with a jump of 8.5 meters and collects his fourth gold medal in Olympic long jump competition. Photo: REUTERS/Gary Hershorn GHM/CMC

Lewis was born in Birmingham, Alabama (USA) in 1961. His parents were heavily involved in the American civil rights movement and even considered Dr. Martin Luther King a family friend.

"When I was being raised my parents were heavily involved in the civil rights movement. They marched down the streets and they were involved in the hosing. Fortunately for them they had a car during the bus strike, so they were drivers, not walkers," said Lewis. "They also had friends there, Dr. King was a family friend."

"What they taught me first of all is that education is important, because you have to have the knowledge to make decisions. Secondly, do what you think it right. Do what you believe in, and when you do that you're going to have criticism, you're going to be attacked because a lot of people are not willing to do what's right."

Although Lewis was just a child during the height of the civil rights movement, the influence of his parents would have a lasting effect on both his personal and professional life.

"When I came into my sport I realized that amateur athletics was technically glorified slavery. [It was] wealthy

people playing games with people, and they got all of the money. The athletes had no control because they were broke. They went where they were told to go, they did what they were told to do."

"So my idea was that, if I am an athlete and a professional basketball, baseball, or whatever player gets paid to do his job, why shouldn't we be? So therefore I really fought on that issue."

Drugs

Similarly, he says he fought to get performance enhancing substances out of the sport. He says: "When it came to the drug issue, I realized that was going to take our sport down. But the best thing out of all of it is that here we are — 14 years after my retirement and my last Olympics — and people still talk about those issues."

"Most of the people walk up to me and they say, 'Oh you won nine gold medals, but gosh, you're the one that was one of the leaders that made the sport professional, or (you were one of the ones that talked about drugs.) They don't just sit there and recite out my races. They actually remember what is relevant."

Carl Lewis Foundation

Along with his own legacy, Lewis' parents also had an effect on his future charity work. Growing up Lewis watched his parents start the track club and become involved in many aspects of the community. That influence translated into his many charitable contributions during his career, and today the Carl Lewis Foundation, which focuses on physical education, family involvement and the arts.

"The foundation for me was just an extension of what I believed in during my entire career," Lewis explains. "I was involved in charity work throughout my professional life and then when I retired I had more time to start my own foundation." The aim was to help "kids who were not staying active and healthy." He tries to get children back into physical exercise and at the same time involve their families to convince them of the needs for sports and a healthy lifestyle.

Veganism

Hand in hand with his charitable approach, Lewis decided to embrace veganism. At the time, he made many headlines with his seemingly controversial decision to start eating a vegan diet whilst being a top class athlete.

Looking back, he says "I did it for one specific reason. As a long jumper, weight is a huge issue. You can imagine trying to carry this weight through the air. So, at the time I ate everything I wanted, but I kind of starved myself to get my weight down, and I realized that was an unhealthy diet. So when I talked to people and did some research, they advised me to go to a vegan diet."

Off the the effect becoming a vegan had on his athletic career, he says: "All of my personal bests came while I was on this diet at 30 years old. But, it is a challenge to the average person. I was fortunate enough to have a cook. The only problem that I had was that once she started cooking, once I became a vegan, the house was dirty because she was cooking all day."

Educating the public

If anything, his career as a changemaker has convinced Lewis of the importance of changing people's perception towards issues of poverty, homelessness and hunger. He believes that in order to create change, the wider public needs to be educated on the issues; something street papers around the world pride themselves on.

"I think that we need to focus on getting information out to everyone. We need to make sure we create the opportunities to reach out to all."

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